Between 1909 and 1914, years later referred to as his ‘manière blanche’, Utrillo fused together an acute interest in materiality with a pronounced sense of place, becoming the most outstanding exponent of a rarefied form of landscape painting, something which can be found in the oeuvres of few artists before or since. This form of painting, if it can be deemed such, has no name, and does not possess distinctive and unifying motifs (or indeed narratives) with which to comfortably separate it from approaches pursued by other painters, contemporary or otherwise, within the landscape genre. For this, and other reasons, the white paintings of Utrillo stand as a body of work wherein no single instance of painting exceeds another, or risks the integrity of the grouping, or happens to threaten the constitution of the whole.

To consider the works of this time as a whole is not to suggest that there is incompleteness in respect of individual paintings, merely that almost all of Utrillo’s works from the period indicate similar concerns, attesting to shared truths and demarcating interrelated ground. It is difficult to pick out a highlight from what amounts to many dozen canvases and boards, in so far as each example offers more of the same. This sameness, however, is richly variegated, and of such distinction, subtlety and grace that his contemporaries, including many of the great moderns, admired its quality whilst being at a loss to explain it. It is, therefore, certainly not my intention to try to do so: only to point to, and reflect on, a number of particularities that result from my own perceptions of the paintings, and to attend to them. For a period of less than six years Utrillo attained a remarkable level of consistency – more consistent in fact than that latter part of his protected and protracted artistic decline, from the mid-1920s until his death at the age of seventy-one in 1955, a period when he was looked after first by his mother, Suzanne Valadon, then by his wife, Lucie Valore.

As a painter, Utrillo’s gift comprised of a fragile balance of interrelated elements, kept, for almost a decade, tightly in check. Seeing the relationship of drawing to painting - a fine pictorial line - is central to an understanding of his achievement. When later this bond weakened, and eventually dissolved into schematic interference, its significance became clearer. The structure is always purposeful, serving to establish complex spatial relationships, redirecting the eye between and beyond buildings, preventing the viewer from getting close enough to anything to dispel the sense of longing. The shuttered windows face outwards. Yet it is Utrillo’s sensitivity to the sublest gradations of tone (the seeing of tone in colour) alongside an ability to process, replicate, and distil the physicality of these sensations through a virtuoso handling of oil paint, that lifts these works above comparable examples of urban landscape painting. Never has a sense of aloneness, of simple goings-on, of leaden skies and light falling on cracking, peeling,
piss-stained walls been painted so beautifully.

The walls, so present in the works of this period, appear to contain that which surrounds them. This sense of the walls as positive spaces serving to fashion the negative spaces is atypical. More commonly, in traditional approaches to landscape, the sense is of the positive space being carved out by the surrounding space, to the extent that one talks about things (figures, buildings etc) as being in landscape. With Utrillo, however, the walls and the buildings that they comprise sit as the landscape: somehow animate. They position all that sits in proximity to them - anonymous passers by, lampposts, trees, cobbles, windows, or the sky - as if these receive the wall’s gaze. This gaze, informed by the burden of its situatedness - of that to which it attests - reflects and absorbs (in the sense of showing that which has come to pass and in taking in that which lies in close proximity: including the gaze of the spectator).

The white of the white period is not white. In a sense this is obvious, as white is, after all, merely an absence of colour. All pigments lean this way or that, towards or away from the warm or the cool. However, an awareness of white’s proximity to other whites becomes, in the paintings of the manière blanche, particularly pronounced. In lightening his palette from the earlier impressionistic works, Utrillo nonetheless maintains a sense of a palpable darkness from which the light comes - locked in - as a series of marked and sullied surfaces through which the whiteness of the building’s facades become apparent. There is no longer only light and dark, white and colour, line and area, but instead: a darkened lightness - a coloured whiteness. By this I mean to suggest that the ubiquity of whites in Utrillo’s works, and the variation of their comportment, engenders an all-over simultaneous contrast: a grid wherein a crowd of greys push and jostle one another, contained as that which desires to be uncontained.

Far from acting to purify and resolve, the whites here extend into and contaminate their surroundings. In rippling out from the painted structures across edges that function to delineate the configuration of the image-aspect of the works (traditionally, the subject), Utrillo’s whites provide a fabric for the paintings, acting to both foreground and unify the particularities within them. Flecked and puckered, there is a physical quality - a play of luminosity and opacity - about the surfaces, assisted no doubt in the making by the bulking materials that he was known to use in order to adjust the reach of the zinc, materials such as plaster of Paris. This physicality renders the optical oddly indeterminate. Is this reproduction or reconstitution? The clotted mesh of greyed whiteness provides surface and subject, enveloping that which it encounters (or which encounters it) and denies the viewer an escape from its reach. Never an absence - always present - the whiteness of Utrillo’s white period is, in effect, illusory.

Utrillo’s handling of paint is a dominant feature of his works, especially those of this time: prior to a strengthening of the graphic element (the drawing) in the paintings of the later teens and into the 1920s, no doubt under the influence of Valadon, whose own
work employed line with vigour, if in a way that was rather detached from the coloured components of the paintings. A great admirer of Degas, Valadon, who earlier in life has modelled for many painters, including Degas, certainly recognised early on that Utrillo’s strengths were not her own, and hers, in turn not his. Nevertheless, she stressed to Utrillo the importance of a bold expressive line, and of compositional clarity: something Utrillo appears to downplay through his employment of chromatic greys.

Having myself encountered his work first in reproduction and then only later in the flesh, most memorably in the particularly fine collection of paintings housed in the Musée de l’Orangerie, there is an important distinction to be made between types of encounter in regard of a construal of the specific function of the medium. The relationship between a painter’s handling of material and the constitution of the motifs present in the paintings requires a dual scrutiny that becomes much less pronounced when encountering works in reproduction, where the distance from the page remains relatively constant within the permissible norms of reading. As such, getting up close takes the spectator no closer to the paint, but only to a piece of the composition, whose component parts (in relation to the whole) have already been taken in at a glance, and in advance of closer scrutiny.

The effect of this staying back is to make the material of paint a result of a psychological activity to see that which is represented - the streets of Montmartre - as a ‘construal’ that has brought about their constitution in paint. When confronting the works in situ, however, the reverse becomes apparent, and the paintedness of the painting promotes itself in opposition to the formulation of the motifs. Minus the circumscription of nearness that reproduction compels, one is left to drift in an out - to and from the painting - and to yield to it from a series of indeterminate positions, both near and far. Seeing becomes seeings, in so far as one’s understanding of the work takes on board what it is as both a handled surface and constructed image. In Utrillo, when up close, the material pushes the image away, which reverses in the process of backing off. Though this happens in all paintings, there is a sense in Utrillo of a prolonged period of inbetweenness. In reproduction, Utrillo’s walls appear textured. In the flesh, his handling - a scarification of material - seems to embody what a wall is, or what one knows a wall to be. This is not simply representation as it is more commonly understood (in the sense of one thing showing what another thing looks like), but rather, it is a form of enactment; a painterly duplication within a given context.

The window has a central role in the visual arts, from Alberti to Matisse. To look through is to position oneself in respect of, and thereby attain the assurance of location. It is also to accommodate a space adjacent to the space in which one becomes situated. Windows permit the painter to see oneself seeing - to project both ways (outwards from an actual vantage, and towards from an imagined location). Yet, in Utrillo’s work something is amiss, and his employment of this device attests to a closure rather than an opening out. Often shuttered, always darkened, the openings in Utrillo’s buildings forbid
access. Within the setting of the street, the spectator encounters the window in assertive guise. No entry! As a barrier rather than an opening, the window permits only speculation as to what lies behind. This sense of something getting in the way compels inquisitiveness - a testing of window after window for the slightest sign of a way in, or opening, testing that is repeatedly thwarted.

Eventually, what becomes evident in the course of seeing Utrillo’s repetitions is that what lies behind is something close to a reflection of what lies in front - the windows in fact serve as mirrors. No entry functions simply as permission to move on, and as an encouragement to perpetually de-localise oneself in regard of one’s surroundings. Yet there is an odd comfort in this; not to be invited in is to adopt the position of a spectator or witness to what amounts to Utrillo’s everyday. The effect is often exacerbated by the placement of equally blank doors, usually offset behind the thinned trunks of young trees, or else iron lamp posts. To see/be, in this context, requires a freedom from engagement. This freedom takes the form of a holding off - a method of preservation through distanciation. The paradox of Utrillo is that the painter of locality (of streets with names - of a closeness to places he knew all too well) is the painter of a distance that results only from a heightened familiarity. The windows and their accompaniments are formal reminders of the impossibility of removal (the removal of Montmartre from Utrillo), and reinforce a sense of contentment that comes from being oneself seeing. There is no outside from the outside - seeing has no behind. Therefore, to be becomes an act of piercing intimacy.

When there are figures in Utrillo’s white works they appear mostly in transit. Sometimes they linger briefly, as if to take in a moment of interest before continuing on their way. Mostly, they occupy the periphery of the work, clinging close to a distant wall, or else appearing to wander into the frame accidently. Rarely are they close enough to make out facial features or details of clothing. Hats are for men and bustles for woman. In later works, the figures acquire a greater prominence, and the silhouette becomes more caricatured. In those works, though not in these earlier paintings, something approaching a quirky, almost bawdy humour informs the action.

The streets of Montmartre witnessed much of Utrillo’s time, and he in turn witnessed its space, the result of the painter’s negotiations of one sort or another, both physical and emotional. Yet Utrillo’s paintings of empty streets don’t, as such, picture these things, in the sense of the works serving to illustrate moments from the painter’s life. More accurately, the non-whiteness of the walls, the handling of paint on surface, the functioning of the windows, and more besides, work in unison as agents of possibility, in so far as Utrillo’s Montmartre is a function of his painting; something that painting can do. This something is indicative of a coming together of a material structure and a linguistic clarity. Although Utrillo - the man - breathed the air of Montmartre, Montmartre (the actual district on the right bank of the Seine in Northern Paris) does not serve as a source of the work, but more a purpose. One knows instinctively that this
Montmartre is not out there. It doesn’t exist, and never has. In critically considering Utrillo’s paintings, it feels appropriate to suggest that only in becoming attentive to their material particularities is one able to resist the allure of the illustrative, and immerse oneself fully in the poignancy and painterly artifice of (t)his world.